British Columbia's Literacy Crisis:
An Alternative Approach

Minority Report of the
Select Standing Committee on Education

February 26, 2007

To the Honourable
Legislative Assembly of the
Province of British Columbia

Honourable Members:

I have the honour to present the Minority Report of the Select Standing Committee on Education.

As I stated at the committee's final meeting on November 28, 2006, the Official Opposition members of the committee have significant and substantive concerns with the findings and recommendations contained in the committee's report. While we commend our fellow committee members for their efforts on behalf of the people of British Columbia, we must nonetheless take issue with their conclusions.

This report offers an alternative view of the work of the committee with respect to its 2006 inquiry, into the specific challenge of adult literacy in British Columbia, and offers an alternative set of recommendations and strategies for government's consideration.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Official Opposition committee members,

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Introduction

On February 20 2006, the Legislature empowered the Select Standing Committee on Education to examine, inquire into and make recommendations with respect to finding effective strategies to address the specific challenge of adult literacy and, in particular, to conduct consultations to consider:

- Successful strategies from other jurisdictions on the promotion of adult literacy; and
- Specific strategies to improve literacy rates among aboriginal people, English-as-a-Second-Language adults, and seniors.

The committee was empowered to strike sub-committees, hold public hearings around the province, solicit and receive submissions from recognized experts and members of the public, and provide the Legislature with a final report by November 30 2006.

The Official Opposition has long recognized the critical role that literacy plays in creating and maintaining a prosperous and progressive society and strongly supported the House resolution. The four Official Opposition members assigned to the committee endeavoured to use the process to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing adult literacy in B.C. and to make practical recommendations to government as to how it could best meet its oft-stated goal of making British Columbia the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

Over the course of 2006, the committee held 18 meetings including two organizational sessions, six sets of expert briefings, six public hearings and four sessions during which the committee debated and deliberated on the contents of its final report to the House. The committee heard testimony from 62 witnesses and received written submissions from 75 groups and individuals. Without exception, the sessions in which we heard from educators, literacy experts and adult learners were both illuminating and informative, and provided all members with a deeper insight into the complex challenges of adult literacy.

To that end, the committee's majority report provides a sound definition of the attributes and components of literacy, and the extent to which significant portions of British Columbia society face significant literacy challenges.

Unfortunately, however, the committee's deliberative sessions were significantly less constructive or rewarding. Without divulging discussions that occurred during the committee's four *in-camera* sessions, the Official Opposition feels that the committee was unwilling to provide a complete report on the causes of adult illiteracy in the province and was unwilling to offer practical and constructive recommendations as to how government might seek to reverse this growing problem.

We do not question the integrity or good intentions of the government members of the Select Standing Committee on Education. We do believe, however that the committee's majority report does not adequately address the problem of adult literacy, and we hope that a minority report will fill in some of the noticeable gaps.

Opposition Members of the Select Standing Committee on Education

Doug Routley (Vice-Chair)
MLA, Cowichan – Ladysmith

David Cubberley
MLA, Saanich – South

Rob Fleming
MLA, Victoria – Hillside

Norm Macdonald
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Background/Definitions

The challenge of adult literacy and the economic, social and citizenship problems it poses for British Columbia cannot be understated. The problem is both complex and immense, and readers must first understand some of the working definitions used by literacy experts in order to understand the scope of the problem.

The Select Standing Committee's majority report, based on the briefings provided by Canadian and international literacy experts, did a commendable job of defining adult literacy for the purposes of the committee's investigation and measuring the extent to which it is prevalent in Canada and British Columbia.

For the purposes of this report and to establish a context within which we can offer solutions and strategies, we will use the same definition of adult literacy provided by Dr. Satya Brink, Director of National Learning Policy Research, Human Resources and Social Development Canada:

> *"The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community. It is not about whether or not one can read, but about how well one reads."*

Dr. Brink further divided literacy into four simple sub-categories or domains:

- **Prose Literacy:** The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, brochures and instruction manuals;
- **Document Literacy:** The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts;
- **Numeracy:** The knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing an account, figuring out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement; and,
- **Problem Solving:** Involves goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution procedure is available. The understanding of the problem situation and its step-by-step transformation, based on planning and reasoning constitute the process of problem solving.

An individual's proficiency in the first three of these skill sets is readily measurable according to a points system ranging from 0 to 500 in which Level 1 consists of scores between 0-225 points; Level 2 consists of scores of 226-275 points; Level 3 consists of scores of 276-325 points; Level 4 consists of scores from 326-375 points and level 5 consists of scores of 376-500 points.

Functional literacy, that is the ability to function in a modern economy and knowledge-based society, is defined as scoring 276 points or more and attaining Level 3 in the domains of Prose Literacy, Document Literacy and Numeracy. Problem Solving is scored separately on a four-level scale.

Level 3 is considered to be the minimum required for effective participation in the knowledge-based economy.

Demographic Profile

It is useful to provide some information on the current makeup of the B.C. population when considering literacy issues. According to the information provided to the committee by Statistics Canada, our population is as follows:

• Total population (2003)	**4,154,600**
• Working-age individuals (15-64)	2,972,400
• Seniors (65+)	586,800
• Immigrants	1,009,820

When one looks at the B.C. population based on language of origin or language spoken at home:

• Total population (2003)	**4,154,600**
• English only	2,825,780
• French only	54,400
• Non-official language only	939,945
• English and non-official language	39,525
• French and non-official language	1,705

When one looks at the educational backgrounds of the working-age population (15-64):

• Working-age individuals (15-64)	**2,972,400**
• Less than high school	886,085
• High school graduate (only)	395,735
• Trade or Vocational certification	99,020
• College	853,120
• University	929,610

Measuring Literacy in British Columbia

British Columbia has a serious and significant literacy problem. It is not an issue to be managed, nor a simple problem to be solved by means of collecting well-intentioned but half-hearted programs under clever titles and assigned catchy slogans. It is a problem of breathtaking proportions.

As was accepted by the committee, the most reliable measures of literacy rates are the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS). Both studies were commissioned by Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The surveys' findings are as follows:

- In 1994, the B.C. population aged 16-65 was 2,300,000:
    - 1,400,000 (or 61.5 percent of the working-age population) ranked at Level 3 or higher and were therefore consider to have sound literacy skills;
    - 900,000 (or 38.5 percent of the working-age population) ranked at Level 2 or lower and were therefore considered to have poor literacy skills.

- In 2003, the B.C. population aged 16-65 was 2,800,000:
    - 1,800,000 (or 65.2 percent of the working-age population) ranked at level 3 or higher and were therefore considered to have sound literacy skills;
    - 1,000,000 (or 34.7 percent of the working-age population) ranked at Level 2 or lower and were therefore considered to have poor literacy skills.

The results of these surveys and HRSD Canada's subsequent analysis were summarized in the committee report as:

- Canadian literacy levels were average and ranked in the middle of the six jurisdictions that participated in the 2003 IALSS;
- Canadian literacy rates were higher than those of in the United States and the sole participating Mexican State;
- British Columbia literacy levels were on par with those of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and behind those of the Yukon Territory.

The extent of British Columbia's literacy problem becomes even more apparent when one look into the demographic breakdown of the province. Again, here the committee owes a debt to Dr. Brink and the work of HRSD Canada.

- 34.7 percent of working-age British Columbians have poor prose literacy skills (400,000 ranking at Level 1; 600,000 ranking at Level 2);
- 43.7 percent of working-age British Columbians have poor numeracy skills (471,000 ranking at Level 1; 762,000 ranking at Level 2);
- In the past decade, the provincial workforce grew by 500,000 people, including 100,000 with Level 2 literacy skills;
- Looking at the 400,000 British Columbians with Level 1 literacy skills:
    - 64 percent are immigrants;
    - 46 percent are employed;
    - 45 percent had less than a high school education, while 36 percent had completed high school and 19 percent had some post-secondary education;
    - 36 percent came from English or French backgrounds, while 64 percent came from non-official language backgrounds.
- Looking at the 600,000 British Columbians with Level 2 literacy skills:
    - 32 percent are immigrants;
    - 59 percent are male;
    - 67 percent are employed;
    - 28 percent had not completed high school, and 34 percent had some post-secondary education;
    - 69 percent came from English or French backgrounds, while 31 percent came from non-official language backgrounds.

Dr. Brink also provided specific information on the literacy challenges facing British Columbia's Aboriginal community. According to her research, while our aboriginal population had higher literacy and numeracy scores than in other provinces and territories, the mean literacy and numeracy scores for aboriginal British Columbians are consistently lower than those of non-aboriginal British Columbians. Indeed, working age aboriginals in B.C. scored 259 in prose literacy and 242 in numeracy, both of which give them the rank of Level 2. Finally, it is worth noting that while 34 percent of non-aboriginal working-age British Columbians has low literacy levels, 56 percent of working-age aboriginal British Columbians have low literacy skills. Sadly in this category, British Columbia is much higher than the Canadian average.

In summary, two-thirds of British Columbians with Level 1 skills and one-third of those with Level 2 skills are immigrants from non-official lingual backgrounds. Half of British Columbians with Level 1 skills have completed high school and/or some post-secondary education, while nearly three-quarters of those with Level 2 skills had completed high school or had some post-secondary education.

The very fact that so many of our least literate citizens have strong educational backgrounds can only be considered as both a drag on the provincial economy and as a tragic waste of human potential. We must acknowledge that investing in these people's futures is a small price to pay if we want to ensure that all British Columbians benefit from what our province has to offer.

To reiterate, with respect to the statistical analysis of British Columbia's literacy problem, we do not disagree with the committee's assessment.

Where the Committee Erred

As we stated in our introduction, our purpose in presenting this minority report is to fill in some of the gaps we saw in the committee's approach to recommending a literacy strategy for British Columbia. First, we believe that the committee erred both in how it addressed the depth of the literacy problem and to what extent government policy and past government actions have contributed to the problem. We also believe that the committee did not exercise sufficient creativity in developing recommendations to government that would truly make a difference for those adult learners in British Columbia who are trying to improve their literacy skills.

In our view, the committee chose to interpret the information and statistical analysis of literacy challenges in British Columbia in the most favourable manner possible, and in a way that seems designed to underscore or reinforce government's previously stated literacy goals. While it would hardly be the first time that a legislative committee did government's bidding, the degree to which the committee's majority report sought to bolster government's position was more than a bit surprising.

After outlining the evidence on the extent of literacy challenges in British Columbia and how well the province fared when comparing British Columbia's literacy skills to those of its neighbours, the committee concluded that:

"...Canada outperformed the two other North American jurisdictions participating in the 2003 international survey of adult literacy skills-the United States and the Mexican State of Nuevo Leon."

Thus satisfied that the literacy challenge in British Columbia was not as dire as those found in our neighbouring states, the committee said that:

"Therefore the challenge for the provincial government to attain its goal [of making British Columbian the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2010] is a manageable one."

To set the context for the rest of its report, the committee summarized the literacy challenge facing government as:

"By 2010, the year when the next international survey will be conducted, B.C. will have to match, if not exceed the performance of the Yukon Territory."

In short, the committee, in its effort to provide data and conclusions that support government's oft-repeated goal and slogan, summed up B.C.'s literacy challenge as a simple exercise in maintaining the status quo.

The committee seems content to ignore the fact that the number of people with poor literacy skills had increased by 100,000 over the past decade. It seems indifferent to the fact that 1,000,000 of our citizens are not equipped to function, let alone succeed, in our modern economy and society. The committee glosses over the fact that one-in-four British Columbians are likely trapped in low-wage employment with little hope of improving their circumstances or those of their families. Success, according to the committee, lies in ensuring that British Columbia's waste of human potential is marginally less than that of our neighbours.

We beg to differ. We simply do not believe that British Columbians would consider leaving 1,000,000 of our fellow citizens behind to be a "great goal for a golden decade".

Moreover, by suggesting that government need only maintain the status quo and match the literacy performance of the Yukon in 2010, the committee has signaled that it accepts government's argument that 2010 is the appropriate timeframe for measuring literacy success, and seems unwilling to suggest that British Columbians as consumers and as voters might benefit from more frequent or more timely measurements of progress. By committing to 2010 as the next appropriate literacy goalpost, the committee has confirmed that it will not permit voters to judge the progress of government literacy programs during the next election, nor will it seek to reverse the apparent trendline that could well see another 30,000 British Columbians falling into the low literacy skills trap.

We also take issue with two aspects of the committee's rather brief conclusion. First, the committee said that:

> *"During our deliberations, committee members have wrestled with the issue of additional resource allocation. The questions we considered were: Are British Columbians getting the best bang for the proverbial buck? Or, could government accomplish more through consolidation and more coordination of existing funding?"*

The committee then went on to suggest that in its view, government should establish a single secretariat responsible for coordinating all of government's literacy activities, and given a mandate to:

> *"...oversee government's initiatives and to centralize service delivery for maximum effect; to find efficiencies in the existing investment in literacy so that existing funding is directed at helping B.C. perform to its potential; and to monitor progress made."*

Centralized secretariats have a mixed record of success. Some have proven adept at coordinating government programs and eliminating overlap and duplication. Others have fallen victim to bureaucratic infighting and turf wars in which other competent agencies adopt intransigent position when the new agency begins to usurp its former authority.

Centralized secretariats also have a history of consuming considerable human and financial resources as they gear up for operations. One only need look at Partnerships B.C., government's central agency responsible for reviewing capital construction projects, to see how expenses can mount. In that particular case, not only has the central agency amassed an impressive payroll, but government has had to assign it additional work in order to justify its continued existence.

One must also ask why the committee, in recommending the creation of a single secretariat, chose only to suggest that it coordinate government literacy programs. The committee heard from literacy experts and adult educators that government, non-profits and the private sector all play a key role in the successful delivery of literacy programs, and that indeed, government must ensure that more programs are delivered at the workplace. Given this reality, it would seem more prudent if the committee had suggested creating a literacy agency that incorporated more than just government interests.

We must come back to what seems to be the central question facing the committee, and indeed which it asked of itself: should it recommend to government that it allocate additional resources to literacy programs? In its conclusions and recommendations the committee seems to imply that it would rather refocus existing resources than seek new ones, but this critical question is never answered explicitly. We can only assume that this oversight was intentional.

We also question why the committee seems so reluctant to assign responsibility or apportion blame for the extent of the province's literacy problem. It is one thing to recognize that the problem exists and even to propose ways to address it. It is something entirely different to look back at past mistakes, and determine where errors in policy were made. We do not say this to simply throw partisan barbs at the past two B.C. Liberal government…clearly the problem existed before they came into power in 2001.

We question, however, why the committee was unwilling to more thoroughly examine both policy and funding decisions that have been made over the past several years and perhaps offer some recommendations as to where mistakes were made and what we can learn from them for the future.

We also have serious concerns about the committee's observations and the nature of the literacy strategies it proposed. Again, we found that the committee seemed unwilling to make recommendations that were consistent with the kinds of input it received from those who teach literacy programs or those who participate in them if such recommendation might impose additional commitments on government.

Unfortunately, many of the recommendations that the committee did offer were unimaginative and in some cases downright bizarre. Three notable examples include:

- **Recommendations 1.1 and 1.2** *"Government could play a leadership role by encouraging each branch of government to become a learning organization that provides skills upgrading opportunities for all staff; and, making a commitment to promote plain language in all communications materials and information resources provided to the public."*

  Thus after exhaustively documenting the extent of the literacy challenge in B.C. acknowledging the fact that nearly one-third of British Columbia's working age population have literacy skills that do not allow them to function in our modern economy and knowledge-based society, the committee believes we will be better served if we work to improve literacy in the provincial public service and encourage government to focus on communications in plain language. These two recommendations would appear to offer little to those who really struggle with literacy.

- **Librarians' Perspective** The committee heard from librarians at both public libraries and those within the provincial K-12 education system, and seemed to acknowledge that both libraries and librarians play a critical role in developing childhood literacy skills and improving them through adulthood. The observations are not surprising in that the experts who spoke to the committee made it clear that instilling a sound literacy foundation and love of reading in children was a key step in ensuring that they continued to improve their literacy skills in later years. However, despite learning that a paltry 2 percent of our public schools employ full-time teacher-librarians, the committee seemed to ignore this disturbing fact, and then chose not to offer any recommendations to improve the situation.

- **Numeracy** The committee heard time and again about the importance of numeracy as a component of literacy skills, and the degree to which low numeracy levels affect British Columbia. The committee noted that 44 percent of working-age British Columbians had poor numeracy skills and that this deficit manifested itself in both lower levels of workplace productivity (for those already in the workforce) and in lower recruitment of young people into post secondary fields involving math and sciences. The committee was specifically cautioned that:

  "These numeracy scores also mean a lot in the context of the knowledge economy. The OECD has pointed out that Canada is lower than the other developed countries, particularly in education in the hard sciences and mathematics. The roots are here in the numeracy scores"

Yet despite receiving this specific and pointed caution, the committee chose not to offer government any recommendations for improving numeracy in our K-12 educations system.

A Few Practical Recommendations

As we indicated earlier, our purpose in issuing this report to offer some practical recommendations to government that were overlooked by the committee's majority report.

Revisit government's commitment to literacy

The Official Opposition members of the committee accept that the government is sincere in its desire to improve literacy in the province and truly make British Columbia the most literate jurisdiction in North America. That said, we recommend that government bolster that commitment with three specific actions:

- **Set Higher Targets.** Given that government will likely attain its stated literacy goal by maintaining the status quo, we call on government to set the bar higher and commit to significantly reducing poor literacy levels in the province. To this end government could commit to reducing the number and proportion of British Columbians with Level 1 and Level 2 literacy skills by 20 percent over the next two years.

- **Reconsider the Establishment of a Literacy Secretariat.** We are unconvinced of the utility of creating a new bureaucracy mandated to administer and coordinate all of government's literacy programs. As discussed earlier, the success of such central agencies is mixed at best, and would be truly unfortunate if the creation of a new literacy secretariat consumed limited literacy resources.

- **Re-examine Literacy Funding.** If government is prepared to go through the exercise of creating a single agency or secretariat to coordinate provincial literacy programs and ensure that government's literacy funding is being used in the most efficient manner possible, it seems reasonable that government commit to a broader analysis of its literacy budget to determine if it is adequate to the task at hand. Refocusing existing resources is useful, but ensuring that resources are adequate in the first place is critical.

- **Establish Realistic Timelines and Measurable Goals**: By setting 2010 as the timeline for achieving an easily attainable literacy goal, government seems more interested in supporting political slogans than helping people with real literacy needs. We recommend than it addition to setting a moderately more ambitious literacy goal, government commit to providing British Columbians with more timely measurements of its literacy accomplishments.

Address barriers to literacy created by income assistance policies

Time and again the committee heard from adult learners, education providers and literacy experts who described the difficulties individuals faced in accessing the training and education that would improve their literacy skills. These were people that had gone through the difficult and often embarrassing process of recognizing that they had a literacy problem only to find out that access government support was difficult if not impossible given their personal circumstances.

Ted James from Douglas College described the situation facing many adult learners as:

"Literacy is an issue that carries deep shame with it...an issue that people hide as long as they can...what is even more distressing is that if they are on social assistance, their social worker has stopped asking about literacy. If they are brave enough to say that they have problems reading and writing, the information is not considered important. Literacy is no longer recognized as a barrier for employment by the ministry [of Employment and Income Assistance]...people on social assistance are no longer referred to literacy programs or given financial support to attend. This policy is destroying public programs."

Ingrid Kolsteren of Vancouver Community College told members:

"Literacy needs to be seen as a realistic and authentic part of the employment program. Income assistance recipients need to be encouraged and supported instead of sent to low-paying jobs. Parents need to be able to remain on social assistance and take literacy programs and not placed in job programs simply because their youngest child reaches the age of three."

Laurie Gould of Vancouver Community College told us that:

"I'll speak to my particular group, which is students with literacy levels below grade eight. The single largest impact on their ability to come to school in the last five years has been caused by changes in the Ministry [of Employment and Income Assistance] ...funding and the ability for students who are on social assistance to access upgrading classes. It has affected them hugely. There are other things that have affected the ability to access day care, but fundamentally it's that the students can no longer be funded to come to school."

The prohibition on individuals receiving income assistance from attending literacy programs is unnecessary. Government seems to be telling income assistance recipients that they may either take minimal job training programs that might lead to low-wage employment, or do nothing but wait for their benefits to end. Neither of these options will help individuals improve their personal circumstances.

We strongly urge government to rescind this counterproductive policy and re-examine other barriers including the ability to access child support, basic transportation and other medical and mental heath services that would otherwise prevent individuals from accessing this basic level of education.

Re-evaluate the province's commitment to ESLA support for new Canadians

The committee heard from literacy experts and educators about the critical role that English as a Second Language training (ESL) and English Language Services for Adults (ELSA). As was illustrated in the statistical information, while 64 percent of British Columbians with Level 1 skills came from non-official language backgrounds, 55 percent had high school and/or some post secondary educations. While only 34 percent of British Columbians with Level 2 skills came from non-official language backgrounds, 72 percent had either completed high school and/or had some post secondary education. Clearly there is a large number of new British Columbians who have sound educational backgrounds and who only need assistance in improving their language and literacy skills to become more productive participants in the provincial economy.

Victor Guenther of the Adult Educators Public Service Alliance told the committee about what he saw as the:

> *"...constantly alarming deficit in rudimentary literacy...many adult learners come to communications 11 or 12 courses with perhaps only a 200 or 300 word vocabulary and a grade four-to-six writing and reading comprehension level. The ability to speak English haltingly in social contexts is not a successful prerequisite for studying six textbooks in one semester at the grade 12 level."*

Lynda Toews of the Surrey Teachers Association told the committee that immigrants with some English from their home country test into ELSA at level three (the equivalent to grade four or five in our K-12 system). Toews said that this situation:

> *"...means they get a limited number of hours, and then they're out on their own. That's supposed to be sufficient to get them to work. If grade five were sufficient to get people to work, we would finish our education system at grade five. It's not sufficient. There is a gap between grade five and grade ten, where people could get into other training programs, or grade 12, where they can go to post-secondary. That gap needs to be addressed....The ELSA program does not go far enough."*

While the committee did recommend that government focus new federal funding for settlement services on the provision of higher-level English language services throughout the province, the committee did not seem to accept the inescapable fact that irrespective of whether they were born in the province or have moved here from elsewhere in Canada or the world, those who struggle with literacy are our responsibility, and will become our burden if we do not help them to help themselves.

To that end we strongly recommend that government re-examine its commitment to the provision of ESL services and extend fee-free ELSA programs to the intermediate level (Canadian benchmarks, Levels 5-8) as the standard program for most new immigrants. This service would both increase new British Columbians' ability to both enter the job market (and address our short to medium term labour shortage) and allow new British Columbians to move into higher levels of training and education so that they can improve their families' circumstances over the long term.

Re-evaluate government's commitment to detection and prevention programs

The committee heard time and again about the need to keep students as students. Indeed many of those who addressed the committee pointed out that students are one of the easiest groups to teach, simply because they were already in the publicly-funded education system. This may seem self-evident, but experts pointed out how difficult it was to bring people back into learning environments once they had left, and therefore stressed the need to adopt a prevention and early intervention approach to literacy to ensure that the K-12 educations system provided appropriate supports to vulnerable students.

In our view, government must place a higher priority on identifying students who are underperforming early in their K-12 years. Dr. Brink told the committee that:

> *"The way you do better is to do several things. The first is to do prevention—to keep your kids in school, make sure they get that foundation—and then to be able to do retention—make sure they retain those skills".*

Dr. Brink stressed the importance of early intervention by noting that:

> *"if you don't do it in those twelve years, you're paying twice, because you missed it in the twelve years and then you're going back and trying to get them to get something that's a high school equivalency. It never, in terms of cost-benefit, ever works out—much better to do it while they are in high school."*

While we commend the committee for recommending early detection, we cannot understand why it stopped short of calling for a sustained investment in early interventions. Detection without remedy is pointless, and any useful program requires a clear focus and additional targeted resources that can be used to make interventions effective. Perhaps the committee was embarrassed by the government's recent education record and its shameful legacy of critical program reductions and funding cuts. Perhaps the committee didn't want to acknowledge that government's recent policy decisions have exacerbated the literacy challenges facing so many of our young people. Irrespective of the reason, the committee failed to come to terms with this critical issue.

As was previously noted, 25 percent of our working age population lacks high school, while 36 percent those with of Level 1 and 38 percent of those with Level 2 skills have graduated from high school without the literacy skills for optimal employment. These citizens are working well below their potentials, cannot train to help British Columbia meet the demand for skilled workers, and are working at jobs where they are at high risk of sliding further into illiteracy. Early intervention in the K-12 system will bring all children up to grade-level literacy and must be seen as a central tool for stemming the creation of new generations of low-literacy adult British Columbians.

Develop an aboriginal-focused literacy program appropriate for on and off-reserve learners

The committee heard several submissions focusing on the unique challenges facing First Nations learners and the differing challenges facing those who live on and off reserve. The research demonstrates that aboriginal people tend to score lower on average than non-aboriginals in numeracy and literacy, are more subject to low literacy (56 percent) than non-aboriginals (32 percent). It is also well documented that aboriginals are subject to significantly higher unemployment rates and face a greater likelihood of working at the economic margins. However, as Dr. Brink notes:

> *"Our findings show ... that if aboriginal people get the foundation skills—the 'Velcro' score of 276, they score as well as anybody else. If they don't have the literacy skills and the knowledge they need to function in jobs when they graduate from high school, training is not going to fix their problem. Why not? Only 20 percent of Canadians with the lowest literacy scores (Level 1) get any training at all, since employers are unwilling to invest in people who lack literacy skills....So give them the literacy skills as soon as you can because that makes the biggest difference."*

Again, we must focus on detecting literacy problems early and addressing them. There are simply not enough resources in play to fund the needed work, or the outcomes would look a lot different. Urban aboriginal populations are, after immigrants, the most at-risk upon arrival at school. Targeted interventions to develop and sustain literacy skills would help aboriginal learners thrive and reduce the likelihood of dropping out or graduating with low literacy.

Develop an ongoing human capital strategy based on improved adult literacy

It is both ironic and tragic that in a time of economic growth and skill shortages, the committee tasked with developing initiatives to address our massive literacy challenge, chose not to recommend investments in social solutions that have succeeded in other jurisdictions.

We have developed a knowledge-based economy (in which individuals require Level 3 literacy skills if they are to participate) and yet we seem content to import educated, skilled immigrants and then consign them to menial jobs and uncertain futures. This approach raises troubling questions about citizenship and social equity, and is stunningly short-sighted from the perspective of fostering future economic growth. Again Dr. Brink characterized government's current approach to addressing immigrant literacy challenges as:

"It's such a waste of human capital. We are sitting on this goldmine of human capital, and you in particular—29 percent [immigrants]—could really make this province dance and sing if you get that fixed."

A one percent gain in the provincial literacy rate of B.C. will boost the GDP by $1.6-billion. This fact alone should have focused the committee's attention on addressing literacy as a human, social and economic development priority. The demand for competitiveness, higher productivity, and higher skills will not be met without increasing our literacy rate. If we give people literacy skills, they will become lifelong learners who can retrain to meet shifting economic needs. If we deny them foundation skills in literacy, no amount of additional training will really improve their skills.

Conclusion

As we have tried to illustrate in this report, increasing literacy for nearly a million British Columbians who struggle with low literacy skills is important for a host of reasons. Increasing literacy levels increases individuals' pride and sense of self-worth, it allows people to improve their personal and economic circumstances, it often breaks the cycle in which low literacy levels continue from generation to generations and it allow people to better provide for themselves and their families. Any program that can do so much to improve individuals' circumstances is clearly worthy of our support.

But there is more to it than that.

In 2006, the B.C. Progress Board issued a report entitled *Boosting Incomes, Confronting Demographic Change: B.C.'s Productivity Imperative*. Among its many useful findings, the report stressed the link between educational levels and worker productivity and noted that if the province's workforce can achieve a single point increase in its overall literacy level, relative to the international average, it will produce a two-and-a-half percent increase in labour productivity. The Board also noted that our productivity level measures at about 97 percent of the Canadian average, and that the province ranks sixth in the country. The Board deemed this accomplishment to be "mediocre".

We point this out because it is striking that a traditionally business-focused agency has concluded that boosting literacy is something all British Columbians should focus on if for none other than purely economic reasons.

Simply put, increasing literacy levels is good for B.C. business. The 600,000 British Columbians who have either completed high school or have post-secondary training and yet have low literacy skills need our help. If we commit to helping them improve their literacy skills, they will in turn, help solve our growing skilled labour shortage.

Our immigrant community is vast, diverse and skilled. Immigration policies that have encouraged well-trained immigrants to come to British Columbia have been effective, but we must take the necessary steps to ensure that they gain the literacy skills that will allow them to apply their skills in the B.C. workforce.

B.C. has a strong and comprehensive K-12 education system, and we should take pride in the fact that every child has the opportunity to gain a sound education that will allow them to fully participate in the benefits of citizenship. But we can do better. We must take advantage of the time our young people spend in school and ensure that early childhood development, screening and targeted interventions bring challenged children up to grade level literacy and reduce the number of high school dropouts and graduates who go on to become low-literacy adults.

Our First Nations' cultural heritage is a treasure and an asset and yet the history of First Nations social problems and unemployment is a burden we all share. We must provide culturally appropriate literacy program in urban aboriginal communities and help struggling aboriginal students. Only then will we raise employment and income expectations among First Nations to provincial levels.

Taken together, these measures would not only raise B.C.'s productivity and economic competitiveness, but they will also serve to reduce the incidence of child and adult poverty in many B.C. communities. An important take-away message from the committee's work is that we must not confuse literacy with skill development: literacy must come first if skills development is to follow, and in the case of too many of our citizens, skills development is held back by literacy challenges.

A sustained focus on literacy training is the sure way to raise productivity, increase mobility, address poverty, and produce a more flexible, adaptable workforce capable of responding to the challenges and opportunities of the knowledge economy.

Maintaining the status quo is simply not good enough. We must set our sights higher.